

BABESCH 90 (2015), 237-00. doi: 10.2143/BAB.00.0.0000000

A note on the Constantinian Cameo, now in Leiden

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Abstract

This paper offers a response to a new interpretation of the Constantinian cameo, which until recently was kept in Utrecht and is now in Leiden. It focusses attention away from the imperial adults depicted, a man and two women, and onto the cameo's key figure, a boy, whom the adults frame, and at whom both women point. The boy is wearing a helmet and cuirass, clutching a sword hilt with his left hand and with his right hand acknowledging the viewer.

A large cameo formerly in the collection of Peter-Paul Rubens and until recently held by the Geldmuseum in Utrecht, was in 2013 added to the collection of the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. Once known as the Hague Cameo (*Haagsche Camee*), more recently as the Great Cameo (*Grote Camee*), it is generally agreed that it depicts the emperor Constantine joined on a chariot by his wife Fausta, one of their sons, and Constantine's mother Helena.

The cameo is fully described in the established literature, including in this fascicle of *BABESCH* by its most recent commentator.¹ I would draw attention to the following details: Constantine embraces his wife, and although her right hand cannot be seen presumably she embraces Constantine in return. Husband and wife face each other, Constantine looking to the front of the chariot but not at his wife. Rather, he gazes to the heavens, his left arm resting on her shoulders. The shoulder-clasp is reminiscent of the embrace of the porphyry Tetrarchs, once erected in Constantinople's Philadelphion, and later taken to Venice. Here the four colleagues, warrior emperors grasping the eagle-hilts of their swords, have been replaced by four family members, two of them women, one a young boy. Over Constantine's right shoulder stands Helena, his mother, who points under the emperor's raised right arm to the boy. Fausta, Constantine's wife, also points to the boy, who is wearing a cuirass, helmet and sword, and raises his right hand in a gesture of acknowledgment. It is on this boy I shall focus, as I believe he is the key figure in the ensemble, and therefore the key to determining the occasion for which the cameo was produced.

The young boy could be any one of Constantine's sons, and a consensus has formed around the person of Crispus, because the cameo is widely held to have been carved between AD 312 and 315, the period immediately after Constantine's vic-

tory at Rome's Milvian Bridge in 312 and before his *triumphus* in Rome in 315. However, Constantine's focus on family, which is driven home by the presence of the matriarchs, is suggestive of a new imperial style, which was not well developed as early as 312-315. Moreover, there would be no reason in that period to place emphasis on Constantine's son, who in 312-315 could only be Crispus, rather than the victorious emperor. Yet both women point their fingers clearly at the boy, who is the central figure in the family group, not the father, the emperor, who with the mother frames the son. The framing and the pointing both show us that he, the boy, his hand raised in acknowledgement, is to be the focus of the viewer's gaze. The setting is triumphal, certainly, although aspects suggest it is not intended to illustrate a formal *triumphus*. Instead, the cameo alludes to the celebration which attended the promotion of one of Constantine's sons to the rank of Caesar. Moreover, the presence of Fausta suggests it is one of her sons by Constantine, and not Crispus, Constantine's first-born son by Minervina. Fausta bore Constantine three sons: Constantine II (born August 316), Constantius II (August 317), and Constans (probably 323, although possibly as early as 320).² All of Constantine's sons were raised to the rank of Caesar. However, Crispus and Constantine II were raised to that rank together in 317, along with the son of Licinius, and Constans was elevated long after Fausta's death. Therefore, the solitary young boy can only be Constantius II, and the original carving of the cameo can be dated rather precisely to within two years of September 324, for by the end of 326 Fausta was dead.

For this reason, I would endorse the suggestion of Gerda Bruns that the boy is Constantius, who was born in 317 and was named Caesar aged seven, a month after the Battle of Chrysopolis, which took place on 24 September 324.³ Following Bruns, but for different reasons, I suggest the

months after this victory in 324 as the most likely context for the production of the cameo, contrary to the preferred date of Annie N. Zadoks-Josephus Jitta and others, including that of R. Halbertsma, who has argued that the cameo was produced in 315 in Rome. Halbertsma presents an excellent overview of the most important scholarship to date, endorsing the original dating by Zadoks-Josephus Jitta, but adding important original insights. He views the cameo as a gift offered by the senate to Constantine as a private token to balance the rather more public arch erected to celebrate his victory in 312 over the 'tyrant' Maxentius. He posits that it was later recut to add a diadem reflecting Helena's status as Augusta, conferred shortly after Constantine's victory over Licinius at Chrysopolis, in September 324. Support for recutting is found in the thinning of the stone at Helena's head. These are important observations. However, the centrality of the boy, whom Halbertsma views as Crispus, is not adequately addressed.

Some minor points raised by Halbertsma provoke further reflections. First, Halbertsma identifies the fallen enemies as both Romans and 'barbarians', which he uses to imply identification with a war in the West. However, long-haired barbarians fought for Constantine and his enemies in all the wars fought between Tetrarchs. Among the most prominent of Licinius' officers was the Gaul Amandus, who Zosimus calls Abantus. Licinius fought the battle of Chrysopolis with the assistance of a force of Goths under Alica. Second, Halbertsma suggests that 'the gaze of the emperor with the pupil high in the eye is furthermore reminiscent of portraits of Constantine the Great'. I agree with this entirely, but would problematize the statement as follows. Constantine's heavenward gaze is not secure dating evidence nor at all unique to the emperor. Contrary to Eusebius' claim, it was not an indication of Constantine's Christianity, nor does it indicate that the cameo is of the 4th century. The gaze was well-established rather earlier, in emulation of Alexander. Septimius Severus had reintroduced the pose in the early years of the 3rd century, but it had still earlier Roman precedents, on the coins of Nero, where the emperor also wore the crown of his Sun god, and on Republican coins struck for Pompey and Scipio Africanus. If a portrait bust of Philip the Arab, now in the Vatican Museum, has been used to support suggestions that he was a crypto-Christian, the same has not been said of Caracalla, who also favoured the pose. An excellent example of a heavenward-gazing Caracalla can be seen near

Constantine at New York's Metropolitan Museum, where one might also turn to the oversize bronze of Trebonianus Gallus, the only large-scale bronze to survive from the 3rd century, to see the same upwards gaze as that favoured by Constantine's portraitists. Even in Tetrarchic art, where one discerns a clear break in many other ways, emperors frequently gaze to the heavens, for example all four of the aforementioned porphyry Tetrarchs now at San Marco, Venice.

More substantially, Halbertsma's interpretation of the date for the cameo's initial manufacture is compelling, but it rests on a predicate that I find unconvincing, namely that Constantine would object to being represented in a classical manner, as Jupiter, after 315. If this were true, then why would he consent to have the gem recut in this way, when surely he would not wish to be reminded of the fact that he appears as Jupiter? If Constantine was as troubled as Halbertsma suggests, might he not have had a cross incorporated during the posited recutting, replacing his thunderbolt, just as his colossal statue in Rome was shown grasping the 'saving sign'? Crosses were cut into many 'pagan' works later, without substantial additional reworking, although these were not attempts to Christianize images, but rather the cross was employed as an *apotropaion*, a mark intended to protect the image from any demonic force that might enter it or, if that had already happened, to defend the viewer from the evil that might venture forth from within it. However, I do not propose that a cross would have been carved on this gem, either in the emperor's hand or elsewhere, as I am not convinced that Constantine would have had any objection to being represented as a 'pagan' god after 315, or even as late as 324. Indeed, if Constantine objected to being depicted as Jupiter it is as likely to reflect an established devotion to Apollo-Sol-Helios or a wish to distance himself from the patron of the Jovian (Diocletianic) line within the Tetrarchy as it is to demonstrate his devotion to the Christian god.

The suggestion that Constantine did not want to be shown as Jupiter is supported by a quotation from Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*, which Halbertsma translates thus:

By this salutary sign, the true proof of bravery, I have saved and freed your city from the yoke of the tyrant and moreover, having set at liberty both the senate and the people of Rome, I have restored them to their ancient distinction and splendor.⁴

Eusebius revised this reflection and expanded it greatly in a later work, the *Life of Constantine*. But both accounts of the statue and the 'saving sign' post-date 325, when Constantine felt quite differently about his victory of 312. While it is true that in this case the bishop of Caesarea could not misrepresent what anyone visiting Rome could see when viewing a colossal statue in a large public building, this can itself be used to contradict Halbertsma's interpretation. As he notes, the cameo was a small private work, intended to be viewed by a select few, not a colossal statue erected in a very public place. An objection which Eusebius claimed Constantine raised to being shown as Jupiter in the public sphere cannot be applied to such a portrayal on a private work of limited exposure. Audience matters.

There is too much evidence for Constantine's continued interest in 'pagan' imagery to take Eusebius' objection seriously. A second colossal statue, which stood outside the Flavian Amphitheatre and gave its familiar name, the Colosseum, reveals Constantine's feelings upon entering the city of Rome in triumph in 315 did not preclude his presentation as a 'pagan' god. The Colossus was made for Nero, and its head was his on the body of the Sun god. It had been altered several times over the centuries, most recently to resemble Maxentius' dead son Romulus. In 315 it may even have sported the head of Constantine himself.⁵ After 324, the emperor decked out his new city, Constantinople, with 'pagan' statues brought from across the empire, including the much-discussed statue of Constantine that stood atop his porphyry column. Constantine held a globe in his left hand, a spear in his right (until it fell down and was replaced by a sceptre in the 6th century), and on his head the radiate crown of the Sun god. The statue was believed to have come from Phrygia, and a tradition held that it was the work of Phidias, the great sculptor of the 5th century BC, suitably modified. Evidently, this offended nobody, for it stood in place for more than seven centuries until, in 1106, it was brought down by a fierce storm. Later attempts to purify the statue insisted that Constantine had inserted a fragment of the True Cross within the globe. But the discovery of the True Cross by Constantine's mother, Helena, emerged as a legend only in the later years of the fourth century. Before that the message of the statue was mixed, and as Garth Fowden has observed this was quite deliberate, 'an intended polysemy'.⁶

Looking at the Constantinian Cameo, now in Leiden, one might wonder at the nature of Constantine's Christianity. Was it not as yet incom-

pletely conceived, laced with traditional 'pagan' sensibilities, offering no sanction for extreme violence such as the killing of his wife and first-born son? The issue of Constantine's Christianity will never fully be resolved, and each scholar and reader is able to reach his or her own determination based on the inconclusive evidence. Whichever one's solution, in interpreting the cameo all might consider observations by Peter Brown on a slightly later work, the illustrated Calendar of 354. 'The more we look at such art,' Brown suggested,

'the more we are impressed by the way in which the parts that we tend to keep in separate compartments, by labelling them "classical", even "pagan", as distinct from "Christian", form a coherent whole; they sidle up to each other, under the subterranean attraction of deep homologies. The classical and Christian elements are not simply incompatible ... Rather, the classical elements have been redeployed. They are often grouped in such a way as to convey, if anything, an even heavier charge of meaning. The gods make their appearance, now, as imposing elements of power and prosperity... they add a numinous third dimension to the solidity of a *saeculum* restored to order by Constantine.'⁷

How else was an emperor to display his conception of power than in the language of images with which all Romans were familiar, whether they were pagans or Christians? There were more overtly Christian models, for example that of Moses and the drowning of Pharaoh, but these were only now emerging and had never been a feature of imperial art and the language of power. In short, we cannot believe that Constantine would truly have been offended by his portrayal as Jupiter. But even that may be irrelevant, since we cannot be sure that Constantine ever saw the cameo at all, and even if he did, we can never know how he reacted to its imagery.

Halbertsma favours a suggestion, attractive but far from certain, that the cameo remained in Rome, initially in 'the private sphere of the palace' and then in a 'gallery' accessible to 'selected visitors'. If this is true, which can never be ascertained, then the emperor himself could have seen the cameo only briefly. As such, focusing on the emperor's anticipated desires and responses in positing a date is problematic. The best evidence we have, therefore, is internal. The most compelling evidence is not the recutting of Helena's headgear,

which seems perfectly possible, but which could have resulted from a mistake by the original artist or the nature of the stone. As Halbertsma also observes, the surface of the cameo is uneven following the bands of white and colour within the stone. The most compelling evidence is the centrality of the boy, wearing his helmet and cuirass, clutching his sword hilt with his left hand and with his right hand acknowledging the viewer, surely therefore waving to a cheering crowd that honoured him on the occasion of his elevation to the rank of Caesar. This is Constantius II, which allows us to date the cameo to the last months of 324.

NOTES

- ¹ Halbertsma 2015, to which this is a response, provides a full list of references, most notably Zadoks-Josephus Jitta 1966; Bastet 1968.
- ² It has been suggested that Fausta was not the mother of Constantine II, although this does not receive much support among experts. For an analysis of the historical context for the cameo's production, see Stephenson 2009, 215-235.
- ³ Bruns 1948, 8.
- ⁴ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 9.10-11.
- ⁵ Marlowe 2006, presents a compelling view of the significance of Sol Invictus to Constantine as he entered Rome, identifying the alignment of the colossal statue with the Arch of Constantine.
- ⁶ Fowden 1991. On Helena and the True Cross see Drijvers 1992.
- ⁷ Brown 1995, 12-13.

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